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The Peace in South Africa



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POLITICAL TRACTS.

X.—THE PEACE IN SOUTH AFRICA.

(A Letter to the Marquis of Salisbury).

BY

MALCOLM QUIN.

SIR,*

The fact that representatives of the Boers still in the field have approached our military authorities in South Africa on the subject of peace, and that their proposals have been under the consideration of our Government, must be my justification for addressing this letter to you. Upon all Englishmen, even the humblest, devolves the duty of determining, in their own minds, the principles which ought to govern the action of their country at the present juncture; and those who have no immediate responsibility for such decisions as have been taken, or are about to be taken, have at least the responsibility of openly and clearly expressing their convictions on this grave question, and so contributing to the formation of a genuine public opinion with regard to it.

In discharging this elementary duty of citizenship, I, as an adherent of the Positive Religion, am compelled to address myself to you directly, and this for two reasons—first, because English Positivists, deriving their political principles from the teachings of Auguste Comte, are represented neither by the adherents of the present Government, nor by its official opponents; secondly, because the real responsibility, both for the war and for such terms of settlement as we may impose upon the Boers, must ultimately rest with you, as the head of the Government which began it, and is called upon to end it. It is one of the many unhappy results of our present democratic system of rule that it tends to confuse the public mind on this important subject, and that the responsibility for an evil and disastrous policy may fall upon the very man who, in his inner mind, has been entirely opposed to it. I have no right to say that this has been so in the present instance, but whatever may be your personal opinions, in regard either to the war or to the consequences

*As an English Republican, addressing a man whose distinction is due, not to his title, but to himself and his office, I do not fear to give offence by withholding one of those decorations which the lapse of any function corresponding to them has rendered meaningless, and which, as there is every reason to believe, are now chiefly prized by the parvenus of the commercial world.

which ought to flow from it in South Africa, the principle of responsibility is clear: it is not alone upon Mr. Chamberlain that responsibility for these things devolves, nor upon the Cabinet, nor upon Parliament, nor upon the constituencies; it must devolve mainly upon the Prime Minister, who ought, in reason and justice, to be held chargeable with a policy and its natural effects, so long as he voluntarily consents to remain its principal instrument.

It is, then, to you, as the official Patron and Apologist, if not the original author, of the present war that I appeal for the adoption of such a policy of settlement in South Africa, as can alone secure there true and permanent order, and, at the same time, restore to our own country the place of honour and dignity which she has forfeited by her recent action. First, however, it is necessary to recognise the realities of the present situation—realities which, as I admit, the English Government has made no attempt to disguise, but which English Liberalism, with its unfortunate tendency to confuse and misapprehend great issues, has done its best to obscure. In the strict sense of the word, it is clear that negotiations for peace are no longer possible between the Boers and ourselves. According to the declarations of the King's Speech, with which Parliament was opened in 1901, Great Britain has conquered and annexed the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. If, then, the Boers, after such a defence of their freedom as will win for them an eternal place in the history of patriotism, are driven at last to sue for peace, this simply means that the conquest, which a year ago was announced in principle, has now become an accomplished fact. Under such circumstances, we cannot, in any intelligible sense of the words, frame a treaty of peace with the Boers. There can at most be an attempt on the part of a few brave men, who have persisted to the end in a hopeless but heroic struggle, to obtain for their families, their fellow-countrymen, and their allies such terms as their conquerors may be disposed to accord to them, on condition of their laying down their arms. On the other hand, for the sake of securing peace, and ridding ourselves of a standing menace to our national complacency, a few months earlier that we might otherwise have done so, we may be tempted, in certain respects, to abate the severity of the law of conquest. Such a "discussion of the terms of peace," as is now said to be in progress between ourselves and the Boers, may mean this, but cannot, so far as England is concerned, mean more. It is an elementary truth in any theory of international relations that you cannot destroy a nation and annex its territory, and then proceed to negotiate with it; you must either continue to dominate it, under such conditions as you may choose to impose, or restore to it its independence.

It is the latter of these two courses that I, expressing, in this respect, as I believe, the views of all my English co-religionists, would

earnestly and respectfully urge you to adopt. It is not enough for us to establish "peace" in South Africa, using the word peace as indicating simply a cessation of bloodshed. Bloodshed is a great evil, and I would not, by any terms of qualification, appear to underrate the calamities and passions of war—the more terrible in this stage of the world's progress because they are more alien to civilisation, and inflict a deeper injury on the human spirit, than at any former period of history. War, under the circumstances of our age, represents the re-ascendency of the savage man, at a time when we believed ourselves to have dismissed him from our midst. Evil as war is, however—and all the greater an evil, because, as I believe, it is now as unnecessary as it is hurtful—there are evils greater still. It is a greater evil to willingly acquiesce in oppression and injustice—to complacently accept a peace which is only a sanction and organisation of conquest—which perpetuates, and is intended to perpetuate, the very spoliation and usurpation which have formed the essential motives of the war we have waged. For such a peace in South Africa, English Positivists, at least, will accept no responsibility. Even while they believe that war can now be avoided by a strong and prudent statesmanship, they have not condemned this war simply because it was a war. They have condemned it still more because—in the highest sense of the word—it was a war waged in support of a bad policy—a policy as much against the true security and permanent interests of our own country, as against the independence and self-government of the Boers. The principles, then, which led them to condemn the war must lead them to condemn a peace which simply represents the bad policy of the war, realising itself in forms of our civil ascendancy. Injustice does not cease to be injustice when it is victorious; liberty is not less sacred when it is defeated. If it is a law of international order, as I believe, that every nation should abstain from interference in the internal affairs of other nations, then that law does not lose its validity simply because in a given instance it seems to have been successfully violated. The great question between ourselves and the Boers at the present time is not whether their buildings should be restored, and their farms re-stocked for them, or whether they should have more or less of "voting liberty" under some prescribed parody of our English constitution; the great question is whether they should be left a nation, or be reduced to the state of political serfs.

That question it is for us to decide, and not the Boers. They have given their answer; they have fought the good fight; and if, as I assume, they now find themselves compelled to surrender, no Englishman, at least, has a title to blame them. But although it is a question for England to decide, it is not a question which exclusively concerns either England or the Boers. No one will deny that this war, local as it might seem, has had far-reaching international consequences,

or that it has sensibly increased our own national difficulties. It is acknowledged to have done both the one and the other, by those even who are immediately responsible for it. We cannot, therefore, have a sane discussion of the peace in South Africa from the stand point—if I must use the illusory and provocative terms of current controversy—either of the “Pro-Boer” or the “Pro-Briton.” No responsible English statesman—even while in public he may flatter our national arrogance by speaking as if England could shape her action without reference to her international position and duties—will shut his eyes to the fact that on the nature of the settlement in South Africa must largely depend, not only our country’s fame amongst the peoples of the world, but her security and effective force.

It is, then, not as a “Pro-Boer” or a “Pro-Briton,” but as recognising the world-wide consequences, both of the war which we have waged and of the peace which we are about to establish, that I would urge you even now—when such a recommendation may be dismissed as too late or hopelessly chimerical—to give to that peace its only true foundation by boldly restoring to the two Republics their national liberty. I am aware of all that may be urged against such a policy. It will be condemned as impossible, as quixotic, as a ridiculous *non sequitur*, after all the efforts and sacrifices we have made, and some perhaps will reprobate the proposal as unpatriotic, and as holding out to the Boers expectations which can never be realised. Positivists, however, will not be prevented by considerations such as these from counselling a course of action which they believe to be wise and practicable. With them, questions of politics cannot be separated from questions of religion, for the Positive Religion has, as one of its essential constituents, a science of right statesmanship, and the principles of this science are not affected by the variations of our Parliamentaryism, or the ebb-and-flow of the popular temper.

They do not, therefore, believe that a policy based on an admission of error and a desire for amendment and reparation is more impossible for a nation than for an individual,* and they are not to be persuaded that it is either patriotism or statesmanship to shape the permanent life of a nation in compliance with its apparent demands in an hour of passion and violence. Apart altogether from any special teachings of Positivism, every serious student of history knows that governments have frequently had to acknowledge their mistakes, and to act accordingly; that it is the business of statesmanship to resist as well as to yield; and that what, at a given moment, may seem to be the will of the people, may, when that moment has passed, be completely disavowed. Most especially is this true of our later English history. Instability, both as regards

*Are we to be told that a policy is impossible in the twentieth century, which Louis IX., of France, could embrace in the thirteenth—the so-called Dark Ages? (See Hallam’s *Middle Ages*.)

foreign and domestic affairs, is the note of our public life. The policy of one parliament is reversed by the policy of another, while there is hardly a week of an ordinary Parliamentary session which does not exhibit Ministers, as it were, fumbling for a policy, and even in elementary matters of finance and administration, abandoning on one day the attitude they have adopted the day before. This lack of foresight and steadiness in our public life is, I admit, in itself a serious evil, but while it continues to be characteristic of our governing system, we may well guard ourselves against a premature use of the word "impossible." The impossibility of to-day may be the law of to-morrow.

What is it that makes it "impossible" for our Government at the present moment to confess—what I am sure it now recognises—that our war in South Africa has been a mistake, and to make the peace a true and lasting peace by restoring their national liberty to the Boers? If our chief responsible statesmen are themselves opposed to such a policy, or are intellectually incapable of it, then I admit that it is impossible. That, however, is not the impossibility which we are now considering; we are considering the impossibility of situation and consequence—the impossibility which may be supposed to result from the national temper, or from the imperial entanglements which the war has created. Impossibility in this sense, I submit, there is none. If the head of our Government, at the present moment, decided for that nobler policy which is also the wiser policy—the policy of a bold and strong confession of failure, the policy of reparation and restoration—what forces would be arrayed against him? I do not deny that he would have great difficulties to overcome. Difficulties he must encounter and surmount, whatever his policy. It is the business of a statesman to grapple with difficulties—especially if he exposes himself to a charge of inconsistency, or seems to depart from his party tradition. Not to go beyond our own history, the Duke of Wellington had difficulties to surmount when, in such a situation, he accomplished Catholic Emancipation; Sir Robert Peel faced and overcame similar difficulties when he abolished the Corn Laws; Mr. Disraeli faced and overcame such difficulties when he "educated his party" and passed the Household Suffrage Act; and the present Conservative leaders have been occupied since 1886 in overcoming like difficulties, for during that time they have carried a succession of measures, in educational policy, land policy, and local government policy, which seemed entirely contrary to the line of their tradition.

If then, the Head of our Government, at the present moment, decided to play the part of a great statesman, and proposed the restoration of national freedom to the Boers, he would, as I admit, have serious difficulties to overcome, but not such difficulties as have not, in degree at least, been overcome before, and not such difficulties as are in their nature insuperable. Let us admit that within the ranks of his own party,

and amongst some of his professional opponents, he might have to encounter a fierce opposition, and that a powerful body of military parasites and financial adventurers would set itself against him. Even so, there would, as I believe, be a natural capacity in a great and strong policy—great in its generosity, but great also in its masterly prudence—to win support for itself, and disarm much of the opposition which it would at first provoke. If we allow—as I own that we are bound to allow—for the difficulties which such a policy would raise, we must allow also for those which it would avoid, and for the new and potent auxiliaries which it would certainly create for itself. A policy thus bold and commanding would, if prosecuted with the necessary courage and firmness, call into action the best temper and strength of the English people—qualities which not even the vulgar passions of an ignoble war have sufficed to nullify, and to which the manœuvres of our Parliamentaryism can make no appeal. The statesman who proposed such a policy might lose, indeed, some of his ordinary adherents, but all who have been opposed to this war, from whatever point of view, but who have lacked boldness to declare their opposition, or lacked definite principles to give it effect, would at once rally to his support, and a situation would be created in which the policy of vengeance and conquest would itself become impossible. As to the attitude of the mass of the people, we need not doubt. The people may inspire or be inspired, but it is not in its nature to lead, or to refuse to follow a leader, provided only he be sufficiently clear in his aims, and sufficiently bold and steady in giving effect to them. Even after the experiences of the last two years, we are entitled to assert—and it would be easy to cite chapters of history in support of the assertion—that the people may be won to a high policy, if only the same determination and energy are given to its advocacy as are commonly brought to the support of a low. The real difficulty at the present moment is not with the people, but with its leaders, who have been strong and resolute when they have appealed to the lower instincts of the nation—weak, vacillating, confused and cowardly when addressing themselves to its nobler mind. Let the policy of justice and reparation be put before the country with a resource of argument, with a generosity of temper, and with a concentrated strength and decision such as its greatness demands, and we shall then have a measure of its natural influence over the people. At present we have no such measure. An easy and effective trenchancy has marked the advocates of the war, while those who have opposed it—allowing for distinguished and honourable exceptions—have exhibited a timidity and an uncertainty which have robbed a great cause of its natural potency.

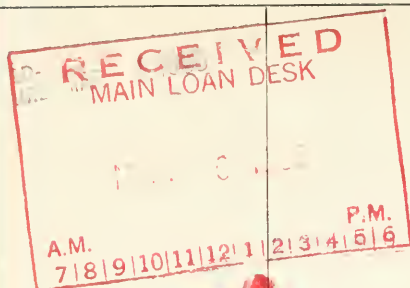
And if, as I believe, the people of England would respond to this great policy, put before them with a greatness corresponding to it, there is

not a people, or a Government, in the civilised world which would refuse to it its moral support; while by the Boers, and by what is best and strongest in the South African populations, it would be received with such gratitude as would itself be a guarantee of its success. Let us, if you will, refuse to accept such a policy; let us deride it; let us condemn it; let us say that it does not give us our money's worth of ascendancy, and that it yields us no material result for our material sacrifices—this we may say, but we are not entitled to say that it is impossible, or that if carried into effect it would not add to our real security, and enormously enhance our national fame. It is, indeed, the alternative policy which I make bold to pronounce impossible—the policy which, for two years and a half, you have prosecuted by a cruel and ignominious war, and which you are about, as I am afraid, to ratify by an unjust and insecure peace. I call it “impossible” because it is against the grain of the world's civilisation; because, as experience has shown, it breeds for you difficulties greater than any which it can have enabled you to avoid; because it is so clearly contrary to the law of modern society—to the scientific principle that defence is naturally strong and aggression naturally weak—that the greatest army ever sent from our shores has failed, in two years and a half, to subjugate the free citizenship of a company of farmers; because, in carrying it out—although we are the wealthiest nation on earth—you have had to load the people with a new and great burden of debt and taxation; because it has procured us such universal ill-will amongst the nations of the world, and rooted so deep a hatred against us in South Africa, that for an indefinite period we must go armed and apprehensive, practising an odious oppression, fearful for our empire, hindered in all the greater enterprises of our industrial and social progress, with a slackened zeal for liberty, and given over to a mechanical militarism from which it has ever been our boast to have remained exempt, and which must involve in permanent misdirection our national genius.

So convinced am I that this is truly the “impossible” policy—contrary to the world's peace, contrary to our national good, contrary to the permanent welfare of South Africa—that I do not hesitate to invite you, even now, to raise the standard of our statesmanship by embracing the saner and nobler policy which I have ventured to suggest to you. Even to fail in advocating such a policy would be a title to immortality, for it could never be proposed in vain. Certainly, no nobler legacy could be left to a great nation by a statesman about to quit its service, and called upon, therefore, to give it a last word of grave, candid and impersonal counsel, than a calm and bold recommendation to abandon the ways of desperate and provocative self-assertion, and enrol itself amongst the chief factors of the world's order. The fact that, amidst the conflicts of the present moment, it is to you I propose the adoption of so high a course of action is a proof that

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